



The Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations

**Testimony to the Montgomery County Board of Education on the
FY 2009 Capital Budget and the
FY 2009-2014 Capital Improvements Program
November 14, 2007**

Good evening, President Navarro and Members of the Board of Education. I am Jane de Winter, President of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs. I speak tonight on behalf of the over 52,000 parents and more than 137,000 MCPS students advocating for every child to attend school in a safe, secure and modern facility.

Tonight and tomorrow night, you will hear from clusters throughout the county. Each will describe its need for adequate facilities. Our collective objective is simple. We all want to ensure that MCPS provides appropriate learning facilities to meet the needs of our students for a safe, secure and modern classroom. As you confront the difficult task of setting priorities for construction projects during a time of limited funding, we again urge you to remember that excellence in learning requires excellent learning facilities.

We recognize that this is a difficult year to put together a recommended CIP. We continue to support, as we have in the past, all efforts to ensure that Montgomery County obtains its fair share of funding for school construction from the State of Maryland. We also urge the Board of Education to do what it can at the local level to find sources of funding so that the county can properly meet the capital needs of the school system.

You know that constraints in state and local funding as well as continuing construction cost increases have caused the elimination, downsizing, or delay of multiple projects. The outlook for the next few budget years is not promising. However, rather than lowering expectations, we think it is more urgent than ever to work together to develop a vision of where we think we need to go to address the ever increasing capacity demands, the ever expanding maintenance backlog, and the oft delayed modernization schedule. In our testimony last year we announced the formation of a CIP task force headed by Mike Knapp specifically to address long range planning for capital needs for our schools. The failure to move forward with this in any meaningful way has been a great disappointment as is the failure of this CIP to provide guidance as to how we could move forward if funding were available. It is our joint responsibility to sit down together with other interested parties and look at the whole picture and plan for both the long- and short-term. We outlined many of these broader issues in our testimony last fall and you will find a list attached.

We would like to develop a comprehensive plan for evaluating all schools, and use that evaluation as a basis for setting priorities for accelerating our pace of modernizations. The current modernization pace of 49 years for elementary schools, 76 years for middle schools, and 50 years for high schools is too long. We appreciate that the BOE recently provided information

regarding the costs of accelerating the modernization schedule albeit without a plan to do so—now we need to work together to come up with solutions that will allow all of our students to learn in safe, secure and modern facilities.

The discussions regarding the County's Annual Growth Policy and the tight budget situation have brought into focus the difficult trade-offs between the need for capacity and the need to renovate and maintain our existing facilities. Many MCCPTA members would like to see a discussion and perhaps reevaluation of the Board of Education's priorities for capital spending as set out in page 3-1 in the Superintendent's recommended CIP. Doing so could ensure that limited funds are used most efficiently and that relief is extended fairly according to need. Many schools awaiting modernizations (priority #4) find themselves in a counterintuitive dilemma; their modernization is the only way to add capacity (priority #2) and the only way to get needed capital maintenance (priority #3) but is prioritized below projects needing only capacity or capital maintenance. Some relief may come by identifying new county-wide projects that build upon the success of prior county-wide projects, such as the roof replacements, gymnasium constructions and the bathroom renovations which could extend the life expectancy of buildings but in the short run we have too many facilities need to be modernized.

Parents are anxious for the remaining schools older than 30 years to be assessed for modernization. We recommend that the facilities department publish in detail the criteria that comprise the current FACT score rubric. While some PTAs may have this information in their archives, the current rubric is not well known. Parents and the community are entitled to know how decisions to prioritize schools are being made and we all have an interest in ensuring that the criteria adequately reflect the gravity of the needs of each school. We have asked several times for MCPS to reevaluate the current assessment formula before moving ahead with assessing the remaining schools. There are two components of the FACT score. The first, Facility Assessment with Criteria and Testing, was developed in consultation with experts from other area jurisdictions and the MSDE School Construction Department. We believe that this formula should be re-examined using the available data. For example, for the schools that were modernized recently, or are still awaiting modernization, did the FACT score reasonably reflect the relative conditions of each of the buildings? In hindsight, do we feel that the schools were modernized in the correct order? Without a better understanding of the FACT score, we cannot be confident that more FACT assessments will appropriately prioritize the schools waiting for their modernizations. (We are not asking that the current schedule be changed—just examined before moving on to the next group.)

The second component, the Educational Program Assessment, was developed in conjunction with instructional staff, principals, and MCCPTA. Since MCPS educational specifications have changed since this rubric was first developed, we believe it should be reviewed before additional schools are assessed. So while we've said parents are anxious for the remaining schools to be assessed, given that MCPS will still be working off the current modernization schedule until at least 2018, we believe there is time to take 3-6 months to examine the current FACT formula before assessing the remaining schools. MCCPTA would like funds allocated this year to assess the remaining schools and if not this year, included next year as an amendment.

MCPS should develop and publish a clear set of criteria for determining when school additions will be built. These criteria should include: capacity; enrollment; construction projects already on site; future modernization dates; special programs; the number of portables; a demonstration

of need established by the length of time the portables have been on site; and the age and condition of the portables. The process by which decisions are made and priorities are set must be transparent so that, when funds for additions or other capital projects are allocated, all schools are judged according to the same criteria. We currently hear that the criterion is that the school must be 92 students over capacity or exceed capacity by 4 classrooms or more. These are not always the same thing and we would like a clarification of which is the guiding principal as well as information as to how the other factors cited above are weighed in the decisions.

In our testimony last year, we referred to MCPS Maintenance Director Roy Higgins' estimate that there is a \$40-50 million backlog of maintenance projects. Current information indicates this backlog totals \$63.60 million. Since there is such a huge backlog of projects, school communities have little idea of when relief might come to their school.

MCCPTA would like better information on the ranking criteria for inclusion on the waiting list for other county wide programs. With the full implementation of the new computer tracking system, we believe better information will be available regarding what projects have been done at which schools. The list of PLAR projects completed in summer 2007 in the CIP appendix is a great addition to the publication. We would also like waiting lists for county wide projects to be published even if they come with caveats that the ranking may be adjusted if urgent health and safety needs arise. We believe parents are able to understand that rankings for these projects have some fluidity. We would also like to see information come out this year, before additional restrooms are evaluated, informing parents, students, and staff how to formally request an assessment of their restroom. We again urge that there be an update on lead remediation in school buildings throughout the county.

We support efforts to make sure a school's facilities are adequate for and appropriate to the specific instructional program at each school. MCPS has provided improvements to support Signature and Academy Programs as well as other MCPS initiatives. We have heard that similar program improvements are needed for special education programs. For example, there are high schools implementing the Fundamental Life Skills curriculum that do not have adequate kitchen facilities for these students to access that portion of the FLS curriculum.

In this time of budget shortfalls, the BOE needs to prioritize capital projects based on educational needs. At the same time, the BOE must ensure that significant educational decisions are made with public input and adequate consideration of the impact. We share the BOE's concern that decisions such as the ones to collocate the Carl Sandburg and Stephen Knolls centers did not allow full consideration of their impetus and impact before they were listed in the CIP. We recognize that sometimes decisions are made purely because of fiscal constraints and that some abandoned projects would have moved forward had there been funding. However, some decisions are based on changes in educational philosophies or policy or programmatic changes, and we believe the community must be a full partner in these decisions and have a voice in the fundamental beliefs which guide these decisions. MCCPTA also believes that MCPS had an affirmative responsibility to provide the most accurate information possible when parents came to them with the idea of a Memorial Garden at Stephen Knolls. We support the BOE recommendation to convene a multi-stakeholder work group to review the work of SECAC and come up with options, fiscal and other impacts, and recommendations for the BOE's consideration regarding Stephen Knolls and Carl Sandburg.

The MCCPTA Delegate Assembly has been very supportive of measures to improve school security. We know that children must be safe at schools. We do have some concerns regarding the operationalization of the Visitor Access System and Visitor Management System proposed in this CIP. As we understand it, schools where the office does not have a direct sight line to the front door will have a closed circuit camera and buzzer system installed so that visitors will buzz in and the office staff will be able to verify they have a legitimate reason to enter the school before unlocking the door. As we know that most schools do not have bilingual front office staff, this system should not become an impediment to non-English speaking parents which prevents them from visiting or volunteering at their children's schools or makes them feel unwelcome. We further understand that the Visitor Management System to be installed at all schools will require visitors and volunteers to swipe a drivers license or other form of identification in order to gain access. We have spoken with Mr. Helmuth and he assures us that other forms of identification will be accepted and that there will be other ways to verify that parents should be in the school. Mr. Helmuth expressed support for our idea to involve MCCPTA and other community groups in designing the implementation plan. We urge you to follow this closely, as it will have a chilling effect on parental involvement in some portions of our county if parents believe that they must have a drivers license to enter their child's school. The implementation of the Visitor Management System will require a thoughtful communication plan so community members understand the system and will require training for front office staff so they are not put in the position of policing our parents and their immigration status. We want to hear from other community groups before we fully endorse these proposed systems.

I would like to comment on a point that Ms Cox made in a recent memo to the Board of Education. She wrote of the need to ensure that there is a process for students attending schools or centers which do not have official PTAs to have their facility needs addressed. To that end, I have reminded our cluster coordinators that the special schools were transferred to the Office of School Performance and clusters several years ago and instructed the coordinators to include these schools in their advocacy efforts. When coordinators compile their cluster's facility letters in May, 2008, they will work with parents and the administration of these schools to make sure their needs are articulated. Finally, I would like to point out that while MCCPTA and local PTAs are not always as successful as we would like to be in recruiting diverse parent leaders, we take our mission very seriously which is to speak for children. This means all children, whether their school has a PTA or not, whether their parents are PTA members or not, whether their PTA has 25 members or 2000 members—we speak for children. We appreciate this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the children of Montgomery County and look forward to working with you to meet the needs of all MCPS students.

Broad Issues facing MCPS facilities:

- Is there a plan for how to accelerate the modernization schedule?
- Where is the plan for additional holding schools?
- What happens when we need a high school holding school?
- Where is the serious discussion on doing full modernizations vs smaller renovations based on the Council report?
- When might those renovations or core improvements with an addition be appropriate?
- How can the FACT score process be improved?
- How will changing demographics affect facility and program needs?
- How can we address the huge backlog of maintenance projects?
- What will the impact of new educational specifications for high schools mean?
- Where will the new mid-county high school be located?
- Will we need additional school sites?
- Where might they be located?
- How can we work with the county to ensure adequate school seats arrive hand in hand with new developments?
- How will special education programs be incorporated in this long-range planning to prevent frequent program changes and overcrowding due to the growth in these programs?